

BACKGROUND

There are some 10 million blind and visually impaired people in the United States. At least half are age 65 or older. More than 10 percent are legally blind (with visual acuity of < 20/200, corrected). Macular degeneration is the leading cause of vision loss among veterans and older adults. For those under 60, it is diabetic retinopathy. Other common causes are cataracts, glaucoma and stroke.

WHAT VA IS DOING

Current VA research in this field includes the development of prosthetic retinas and improved assistive devices for the visually impaired, along with new methods of assessment and rehabilitation.

Highlights of current or recent research include the following:

- **Lutein may reverse macular disease**—In a study of 90 veterans with age-related macular degeneration, those who took lutein alone or in combination with other nutrients showed vision improvements, while those on placebo showed no gains. Lutein, an antioxidant found in certain foods, had been shown in past research to slow the progression of ARMD, but this study was the first to demonstrate actual improvements.
- **Prosthetic retina under development**—VA scientists in Boston, Cleveland and Atlanta are working on an artificial retina to restore vision in cases of retinitis pigmentosa and age-related macular degeneration. One model under development uses a camera and signal processor mounted in eyeglasses to capture and send an image to an implanted silicon chip.
- **Vision training for older drivers**—Special computer-based training to improve older people's ability to process visual information could help them avoid automobile accidents, according to a VA study involving 45 veterans that was presented recently at an American Geriatrics Society meeting.

For more information on VA research:

Web: www.va.gov/resdev

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